

Grand Canyon in deep trouble

Panel can't agree on how to fix it

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, Arizona (AP) -- It's hard to get the sense anything is wrong in the Grand Canyon while floating through it.

On a recent spring morning, the Colorado River was cool and calm. Trout leapt, splashing back into the river with a plop. Stands of salt cedar lined the banks, offering shade from the desert heat.

But all is not well in this crown jewel of America's national park system.

The salt cedar and trout are invaders, part of a wave of alien fish and plants that have moved in and devoured or crowded out the native species. The sandy shorelines are washing away. And once-buried Indian archaeological sites are slipping into the river.

The Grand Canyon is in deep trouble, and the government-appointed panel assigned to come up with solutions is torn by competing interests and cannot muster the political will to act decisively.

"The best that we can do is keep slapping on as many Band-Aids as we can and hope the patient survives," complained Pam Hyde, one of two environmentalists on the panel.

The Colorado is a different river from one explored by the one-armed Civil War veteran John Wesley Powell, who in 1869 led the first expedition through the Grand Canyon. The landscape and biology have been transformed by the Glen Canyon Dam, built upstream in 1963 to generate hydroelectric power and store water.

Before the dam was erected, the Colorado would fill with snowmelt and flood violently in the early summer, then dwindle to a trickle in the winter. The dam

smoothed out the flow.

In Powell's day, the Colorado was warm and muddy. Now it runs cold and clear, because sediment gets caught behind the dam in Lake Powell and because the water released through the dam comes from the reservoir's lower, cooler depths.

Over the years, nearly \$200 million has been spent assessing what the dam has done to Grand Canyon and exploring what can be done to fix it.

In an ambitious experiment to see whether Glen Canyon Dam can help solve the very problems it created, the U.S. Geological Survey has unleashed floods, released pulses of water and even simulated a summer drought to see if this would build up the sandbars and restore the river in other respects.

Also, lasers and sonar map the canyon's loss of sand. Implanted microchips allow scientists to monitor endangered fish and follow the movements of boulders downstream.

But an overall plan for saving the Grand Canyon has yet to emerge, and much of the research merely confirms what scientists already know. The sophisticated tests "measure the ever-fainter pulse of the patient," said John C. Schmidt, a veteran canyon researcher from Utah State University.

For example, four of the canyon's eight native fish species have disappeared, and the prospects for a fifth, the endangered humpback chub, are grim. The chub is being hurt by a number of factors, primarily the cold water, which hampers reproduction, and the Asian tapeworm, a non-native parasite that is killing the fish.

The job of directing the science and developing a plan for the Grand Canyon rests with a panel of river users and interest groups assembled by the Interior Department in 1996 in what was itself an experiment.

The 25-member group involves everyone with a stake in Grand Canyon: a river guide, a trout fisherman, tribes, environmentalists, water managers and power company officials. The group reports to Interior Secretary Gale Norton.

But the panel finds itself pulled in different directions as each member looks after his or her own interests. Environmentalists see life or death for the canyon. The states want to ensure access to water for irrigation and 25 million households in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming and Colorado. Power officials worry about lost revenue from adjustments to the river flow.

In one particular clash, fishermen want to catch trout, while environmentalists want to preserve chub. One problem: Trout eat young chub.

"That's where the program has the hardest time: What are you willing to give up in return for improving something else?" said Leslie James of the Colorado River Energy Distributors Association

At some point, scientists say, the group will have to make a choice: Trout or chub. Beach-building floods or healthy plants on the riverbanks.

A retreat is scheduled for this month to get the program back on course. The alternative is lawsuits and the possibility that a judge could dictate the balance of interests in the Grand Canyon -- exactly what the Interior Department hoped to avoid by giving everyone a place at the table.

"The program is not willing to stand up and announce that the program's a failure," Schmidt said. "They're not willing to say the irreversible price for Glen Canyon Dam and its power and water storage is the deterioration of the Grand Canyon."

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